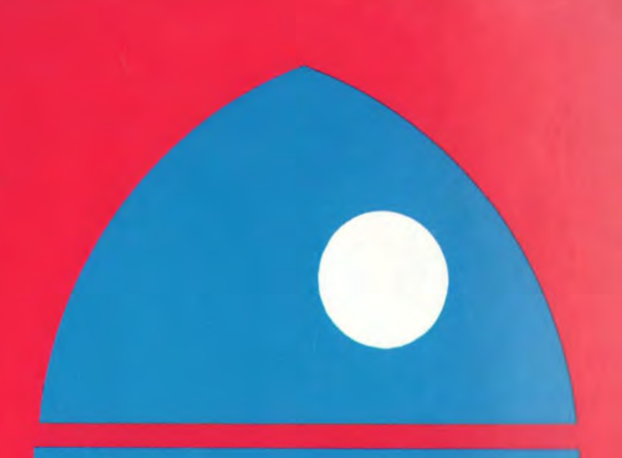


WOMAN in ISLAM

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ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF EUROPE

SULTAN



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Foreword

The West has known Islam for over thirteen centuries now, but it has generally known it in antagonistic terms as an enemy and as a threat. It is not surprising therefore that our religion has been portrayed as a hostile, tyrannical, violent and even idolatrous religion and our culture has been painted in dark and dismal colours. This state of affairs cannot be allowed to persist and disfigure relations between Islam and the Western world. With the advance of knowledge and a greater contact between Europe and the Muslim world, intellectual, social, cultural and political and economic, we hope the old attitudes will change, giving place to better understanding and closer co-operation based on loyalty to facts, honest appreciation of areas of agreement and disagreement between us, and respect for differences, where we may disagree.

The International Islamic Conference held in London from 3rd to 12th April, 1976, has no parallel in the history of Europe for never before have so many distinguished Muslim scholars and statesmen been brought together in one place in Europe to explain before the world the teachings of Islam as Muslims understand them. A major aim of the Conference was the development of a better understanding of Islam and Muslim Culture in the West, with a view to improving relations between Muslims and the followers of other faiths and ideologies.

One of the most memorable sessions was the one devoted to themes relating to woman in Islam. It was addressed by two Muslim women, both coming from the Western background, one English and the other German. As such the Western audience had a chance to listen to the Islamic viewpoint from those who, although coming from a different background, had accepted the Islamic social framework out of conviction and were prepared to share their experience and its intellectual

appreciation with others. I am glad that these lectures are being published in the form of a separate book even before they appear in the voluminous proceedings of the Conference. I am thankful to the Islamic Foundation for producing this book so quickly and efficiently.

Salem Azzam
Secretary General

Islamic Council of Europe
London

23rd June, 1976

Preface

Ours is a period of tumult and change. Doubt, dissatisfaction with the status quo, yearning for revolution seem to symbolize the spirit of the age. Age-old institutions face the prospect of disintegration. Values that have inspired and led man in the past are being questioned, if not scorned. Everything seems to be in a state of flux.

There is nothing basically wrong in a mood of inquiry and re-examination. They have been mainsprings of progress in the past and could be so in the future. The situation changes if man loses balance and composure. If periods like these arouse man to evaluate and re-evaluate in the light of a higher criterion, they can open up new horizons and prove harbingers of future progress. But if they generate an overtly negative attitude, they lead to moral and cultural vandalism. Change as such begins to be prized and sought after. It is forgotten that change could be for the better or the worse. Even more important than change is the direction of change and our sense of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood, of justice and injustice and a commitment to prefer right, truth and justice on their antithesis. There is abundant evidence that we are amidst a period of revolutionary change; there is little evidence that change is in the direction of the right and truth and justice.

In a period like this, it is very important that focus of attention should be shifted from change *per se* to change for what. Minds should be riveted towards the ideals, values and principles which should go to make up man's vision of the future. The centre of concern should be made to move from minutive to the fundamentals, from means to the ends, from techniques to the ideals and ideologies. This is the challenge that besets modern man. This is the issue that attracts most attention of one who tries to look upon the predicament of man in modern society through the eye of a Muslim.

Islam is conscious of the material aspects of human life. It is not a religion of the spirit alone. Its uniqueness lies in treating the entire realm of human life as the real domain of religion. The problems of material life and the technological aspects of society are as much its concern as those of the purification of the soul and the integration of man with his Creator. It is opposed to every such concept of material or spiritual progress that tries to treat the problem in isolation of the other aspect. It adopts an integrative approach. It wants to avail of all the resources at the disposal of man to create a new world where man lives in peace with his Creator and with the entire creation, in short, in peace with himself. And this is what is missing in modern society.

The Family is one of the key institutions of human society. When man is not at peace with himself this state of affairs is reflected most in the realm of human relations, particularly in the family and the relations between the sexes. Any discussion on the crucial problems of our age and on the future of humanity is bound to cluster around relations between the sexes and the institutions of family and education.

The International Islamic Conference held in April, 1976, in London under the auspices of the Islamic Council of Europe and the King Abdul Aziz University focused on the theme of *Islam and the Challenge of our Age*. A special session (Session V, 8th April, 1976) was devoted to an examination of the Islamic scheme for relations between the sexes. Two European Muslim women spoke on the subject and received a standing ovation from the audience. The entire proceedings of the International Islamic Conference are being edited for publication. But in view of pressing demands from different quarters, these two papers and parts of discussion thereon are being published separately in the present booklet *Woman in Islam.*

The present writer is responsible for editing the manuscript. Translation of the verses from the Qur'ān has been revised in the light of the work done in the Foundation. This booklet is also being produced in the Indonesian and Arabic languages. Dr. M. Natsir is supervising the Indonesian edition while Dr. Muhammad Sakr is looking after the Arabic version.

I am grateful to Brother Salem Azzam, Secretary General, Islamic Council of Europe, for inviting me to edit the proceedings and the Islamic Foundation to publish them on behalf of the Islamic Council of Europe. My thanks are also due to Mr. E. Fox for kindly reading the manuscript. Dr. M. M. Ahsan and Mr. Ashraf Abu Turab have also read the first draft and helped me by their comments. Mrs. K. Hollingworth's unstinted secretarial assistance is also gratefully acknowledged.

The Islamic Foundation
17th Jamādī al-Thānī, 1396
15th June, 1976

Khurshid Ahmad
Director General

WOMAN IN ISLAM

B. Aisha Lemu

1

Woman in Islam

During the last fifteen years since I came to accept Islam, I have been asked many questions about the Muslim way of life by non-Muslim friends and acquaintances. The ignorance of the ordinary educated Westerner about Islam is almost total; but the area where the vacuum of knowledge has been most effectively filled with misinformation is possibly concerning the role of women in Islam. Some non-Muslims ask such questions as "In Islam do you believe that women have souls?" and "Muslim women do not pray or go to Makka, do they?" and "Paradise is only for men in Islam, isn't it?"

Fantasy and Escape

According to these assumptions, the Muslim woman is spiritually a non-person, existing in a world of shadows, oppressed and suppressed, from which she will at death pass into a sort of limbo for soulless non-entities. This impression has in the past often been fostered by Christian missionaries, some of whom may even have actually believed it to be true. Side by side with this image in the Western mind is another one projected by the entertainment media, that of the Muslim woman as a member of the harem in the Hollywood versions of the Arabian Nights. Here she forms a unit in a flock of scantily-clad and bird-witted young ladies who lie around in palaces awaiting the opportunity to be noticed by their lord and master, the sultan.

These images are of course very appealing to the Western imagination—firstly of the mysterious and chaste veiled woman, living in fear of her jealous and brutal husband; she is the traditional maiden in distress, waiting for St. George to slay the

dragon and rescue her; and secondly of the slave-girl, dazzling in silks and jewels, awaiting her master's pleasure. Which Western man or woman has not at one time or another indulged in a fantasy in which he or she plays one of these roles? This is doubtless why the fantasy lingers so long. We *want* to believe that these women exist so that we can weave these day-dreams about them, though publicly we must condemn a situation so obviously contrary to the principles of women's liberation.

This then is the fantasy, and as long as we recognise it as such, it is a pleasant form of escapism. But we are here to discuss women in Islam and to outline what is the role expected of a Muslim woman. The best source of information on this must be not tales of imagination and Hollywood's choicest offerings but the source-book of Islam—that is the Qur'ān, and the *hadīth*, the recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

My intention is to bring to your notice some of those verses of the Qur'ān and sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad which relate to women, and to try to draw some conclusions about what these mean—or should mean—in practice, with regard to a woman's life. I do not intend to describe the status of Muslim women in individual countries past or present, however, since this varies considerably from one period to another and one place to another due to the influence of regional customs stemming from pre-Islamic or modern cultural factors.

Spiritual Status of Woman

Let me start by bringing forward clear evidence to correct the misconceptions about the spiritual status of women, and whether or not they have souls which might experience Paradise. The Qur'ān states categorically that men and women who practise the principles of Islam will receive equal reward for their efforts:

> "Surely for men who submit (to God) and for women who submit (to God), for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for truthful men and truthful women, for steadfast men and steadfast women, for humble men and humble women, for charitable men and charitable women, for men who fast and women who fast, for men who guard their chastity and women who guard,

for men who remember God much and for women who remember—for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward" (33:35).

Again God says:

'Whosoever performs good deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, We shall surely make him live a good life, and We will certainly reward them for the best of what they did" (The Qur'ān 16:97).

Each of the Five Pillars of Islam: Belief, Prayer, Fasting, Poor-due and Pilgrimage—is as important for women as for men, and there is no differentiation of their reward.

As God says in the Qur'ān:

"The noblest among you before God is the most heedful of you" (49:13).

One may also mention that one of the most famous mystics in Islam, Rābi'a al 'Adawiyya, was a woman.

Intellectual Status

Having established beyond question the spiritual equality of men and women in Islam, what of their intelligence, knowledge and education? The Prophet Muhammad said:

"The search for knowledge is a duty for every Muslim (male or female)".

and:

"Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave".

"Knowledge" for a Muslim is not divided into sacred and secular, and the implication of these sayings of the Prophet, in modern terms, is that every Muslim boy or girl, man or woman, should pursue his or her education as far as it is possible, bearing in mind the words of Allah in the Qur'ān:

"Only those of His Servants who are learned truly fear God" (35:28).

In Islam therefore, both men and women are credited with the capacity for learning and understanding and teaching, and one of the aims of acquiring knowledge is that of becoming more conscious of God. It is considered in Islam that the more

a person, male or female, studies the creation and observes its workings, the more he or she becomes conscious of the Creator, the Power who made and sustains the creation.

One of the most famous women in the history of Islam is 'Ā'isha, the Prophet's wife. And the quality for which she is remembered primarily is that of her intelligence and outstanding memory. She is considered to be one of the most reliable sources of *hadīth* by virtue of these qualities. More than a thousand *aḥādīth* are reported by her and she is regarded as one of the greatest teachers of the *ḥadīth*.

Generally speaking, in the Muslim world of the early mediaeval times, there was not any bar or prohibition on women pursuing studies—on the contrary, the religion encouraged it. As a result of this many women became famous as religious scholars, writers, poets, doctors and teachers in their own right, such as Nafīsa a descendant of 'Alī who was such a great authority on *ḥadīth* that Imām al-Shāfi'ī sat in her circle in al-Fustāt when he was at the height of his fame; and Shaikha Shuhda who lectured publicly in one of the principal mosques of Baghdad to large audiences on literature, rhetoric and poetry, and was one of the foremost scholars of Islam*.

There are numerous other instances of learned Muslim women who have been teachers, writers and poets, held in the highest respect by Muslim society. There is therefore every encouragement for a Muslim woman to pursue studies in any field for her intellectual benefit and to make use of her academic or professional training for the good of the community, subject to certain moral precepts which will be dealt with later in this paper.

Relations Between the Sexes

Having clarified women's independent spiritual and intellectual status in Islam, I turn next to their status with regard to men, and their relationship with men. We are here looking at a

*Ahmad Shalaby: *History of Muslim Education*, p.193.

relationship of interdependence. The Qur'ān says:

> "Among His signs is (the fact) that He has created spouses for you from among yourselves so that you may console yourselves with them. He has planted love and mercy between you; in that are signs for people who reflect" (30:21).

This is a very important definition of the relationship between man and wife. They are expected to find tranquility in each other's company and be bound together not only by the sexual relationship but by "love and mercy". Such a description comprises mutual care, consideration, respect and affection.

There are numerous *aḥādīth*, particularly those narrated by 'Ā'isha, which give a clear insight into the way the Prophet treated his wives and the way they treated him. The most striking thing about these is their evidence of the mutual care and respect of the marriage relationship. There is no servility on the part of the wives, and there are probably as many references to the Prophet doing things to please his wives as there are of the wives doing things to please the Prophet.

The Qur'ān refers to wives generally in another chapter saying:

> "They are garments for you while you are garments for them" (2:187).

In other words, as a garment gives warmth, protection and decency, so a husband and wife offer each other intimacy, comfort and protection from committing adultery and other offences.

It follows from what has been quoted from the Qur'ān that one of the important aims of Islamic regulations governing behaviour and human relations is the preservation of the family unit in such a way that the atmosphere of tranquility, love and mercy and consciousness of God can develop and flower to the benefit of husband and wife, and also of the children of the marriage.

Therefore in examining the conduct expected of men and women towards each other, both inside and outside marriage,

we have to bear in mind these aims and weigh their benefits to the individual and to society. We must also bear in mind that Islam has a coherent view of life, and that the various aspects of it should not be considered in isolation from each other. It comprises a total way of life, and each part of it needs to be seen in the total context.

To understand the role of a woman in a Muslim society therefore we have to examine both her duties and her rights, the behaviour expected of her towards men and the behaviour due to her from men.

Rights and Obligations

Let us first examine what is due to her from men. The Qur'ān says:

> "Men are maintainers of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on some of them than on others; and with what they may spend out of their possessions" (4:34).

In a Muslim society therefore the man has full responsibility for the maintenance of his family. This is not only a moral but also a legal obligation. Anything a wife earns is her own to dispose of, either to use it herself or to contribute it to the family budget if she wishes.

The wife herself is responsible for the care of her home and the welfare of her family. She may express her views and make her suggestions concerning all matters, but the best role she can play in keeping the marital tie intact and strong, is to recognise her husband as the person responsible for the running of the affairs of the family, and thus to obey him even if his judgement is not acceptable to her, in a particular matter, provided he does not go beyond the limits of Islam. This is the meaning of obedience in the context of marriage in Islam. It is a recognition of the role of the husband as the head of the family unit and the loyalty of both husband and wife to a higher law, the *Sharī'a*.

The Prophet has said:

> "The best woman is she who, when you see her you feel pleased, and when you direct her she obeys. She protects your rights and keeps her chastity when you are absent".

A man is expected to take care of his wife and show consideration to her and to all women as the weaker sex. The concept of chivalry had its origin in the early Muslim world, and is held by many scholars to have passed from the Muslims into Europe at the time of the troubadours of Mediaeval France.

This concept of chivalry has come in for many blows in the last fifty years or so as it runs contrary to the present day tendency for women to try and struggle for their livelihood in a harsh world in the same way as men do. The Muslim opinion is that she *should* be spared from these struggles and worries so that she can give her full attention to the making of a home.

The Muslim woman's role in the home is a vitally important one to the happiness of the husband and the physical and spiritual development of their children. Her endeavour is to make her family's life sweet and joyful, and the home a place of security and peace. This and her early character-training of the children have a lasting effect on the behaviour and attitudes of the next generation when they reach adolescence and adulthood. There is a well-known saying in Arabic—*al-ummu madrasatun* meaning "the mother is a school", which conveys the importance of this role.

Marriage in Islam

We turn now to the procedures of marriage in Islam. When a girl reaches the age of marriage it is customary for the Muslim parents to play a major role in the choice of the husband, but she must be consulted. It is reported that when a girl came to the Prophet complaining that she had been married without being consulted, the Prophet directed that she was free to have the marriage dissolved if she wished.

Nowadays educated Muslim girls are having a greater say in the choice of husband, but it is still considered that the parents' opinion of the boy is of great importance, and it is rare for a boy or girl to marry against their parents' wishes. It is a part of the Muslim tradition for either to be married with the consent of their parents or guardians.

A widow or a divorcee however may marry whoever she wishes, presumably because she is considered to have enough maturity and experience to decide for herself.

When a girl or woman is married it is an essential part of the marriage for the bridegroom to give her a dowry *(mahr)*, which may be of any value agreed upon. This dowry is not like the old European dowry which was given by a father to a daughter on her marriage and thence became the husband's property. Nor is the Muslim dowry like the African "bride-price" which is paid by the bridegroom to the father as a form of payment or compensation. The Muslim dowry is a gift from the bridegroom to the bride and it becomes her exclusive property. (It remains her property even if she is later divorced. In the case of *khul'*— that is, divorce at the wife's request, she may be required to pay back all or part of the dowry.)

The treatment expected from the husband, whether or not he is on good terms with his wife, is clearly laid down in the Qur'ān:

> "Live with them in kindness; even if you dislike them, perhaps you dislike something in which God has placed much good" (4:19).

Another important benefit to wives in Islam is that in the moral sphere there is no dual standard. Whatever may be the habit of men the world over of blaming women for actions which they condone in themselves, according to the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Prophet, God requires the same high standard of moral conduct from men as it does from women, and has imposed the same legal penalties on men and women for infringement of the moral laws. This will be illustrated by examples later in this paper.

Even if divorce is decided on, the good treatment referred to before is still required. The Qur'ān says:

> "Then keep them in all decency or part from them decently. It is not lawful for you to take anything you have given them" (2:229).

Thus the dowry and any other gifts he may have given to her cannot be taken away.

The Qur'ān also says:

> "Once you divorce women and they have reached the end of their waiting period, then either retain them in all decency

or part from them in decency. Do not retain them unjustly so that you exceed the limit; anyone who does that merely hurts himself" (2:231).

Kind treatment of wives and families is a part of the religion in Islam. The Prophet Muḥammad has said:

"From among the believers are those who have the kindest disposition and are kindest to their families, such are those who show most perfect faith".

And according to another *ḥadīth:*

"The best among you are those who are kindest to their wives".

Divorce is taken to be a last resort in Islam. The Prophet Muḥammad said:

"Of all the things God has permitted, the one He most dislikes is divorce".

Divorce

Moreover the procedure of divorce in Islam is such as to encourage reconciliation where possible. After divorce the woman should wait three monthly cycles during which her husband remains responsible for her welfare and maintenance. He is not permitted to drive her out of the house during this period but she may leave it if she wishes. The main purpose of this waiting period is to clarify whether the divorced wife is or is not expecting a child. Its second use is as a cooling-off period during which the relatives and other members of the family or of the community may try to help towards a reconciliation and better understanding between the partners. The Qur'ān says:

"If your fear a breach between a man and his wife, send for an arbiter from his family and an arbiter from her family. If both want to be reconciled, God will adjust things between them" (4:35).

If they are reconciled they may resume the marriage relations at any time within the waiting period, whereupon the divorce is automatically revoked. If further trouble arises and divorce is pronounced a second time, the same procedure is followed. Only if the matter reaches a third divorce does it become

irrevocable. The wife is then free after three monthly cycles to marry another man if she wishes. The first husband is not then permitted to remarry her unless she has in the meantime married another man and been divorced.

This procedure is the normal one followed if the husband is the one seeking divorce or if the divorce is by mutual consent. If the wife seeks divorce against the wishes of the husband she may take her case to the court and obtain divorce.

An instance was reported at the time of the Prophet when a woman came to him saying that although her husband was a good man and she had no complaint against his treatment, she disliked him greatly and could not live with him. The Prophet directed that she should return to the husband a garden which he had given to her as her dowry, as the condition of her divorce. This procedure is sanctioned in the Qur'ān where Allah says:

> "And if you fear that they may not be able to keep the limits of Allah, then there is no sin for either of them, if the woman redeems herself with that" (2:229).

One may observe that modern developments in marriage law in England and other Western countries are tending towards the Islamic pattern, albeit unconsciously, in many ways, stressing guidance and counselling before divorce, privacy of divorce proceedings and speeding of the process of divorce once it has been established that the marriage has irretrievably broken down.

The law of Islam does not therefore compel unhappy couples to stay together, but its procedures help them to find a basis on which they can be reconciled with each other. If reconciliation is impossible the law does not impose any unnecessary delay or obstacle in the way of either partner's remarriage.

Right to Inheritance

Another right of the Muslim woman which is a part of Islamic law is the right to inherit property. The method of division of inheritance is clearly laid down in the Qur'ān and the general rule is that women are entitled to inherit half the share given to a man. This may if taken in isolation from other legislation appear to be unfair; however, it must be remembered that in

accordance with the verse of the Qur'ān quoted earlier, men are charged with the maintenance of all the women and children in their family, and therefore their necessary obligations of expenditure are far higher than those of women. The half-share that a woman inherits may therefore be considered a generous one since it is for her alone. Any such money or property which a woman owns or any business which she runs is entirely her own and her husband has no right to any of it.

Role as Mother

Apart from her role as a wife, the Muslim woman has a very important role as a mother. The status and value attached to parents in the Muslim world is very high. The Qur'ān says:

> "Your Lord has decreed that you should worship nothing except Him, and (show) kindness to your parents, whether one or both of them attain old age (while they are) still with you, never say to them 'Shame!' nor scold either of them. Speak to them in a generous fashion. Protect them carefully and SAY: 'My Lord, show them mercy, just as they cared for me as a little child' " (17:23-24).

Again God says:

> "We have enjoined man to respect his parents; his mother bears him with fainting after fainting, while his weaning takes two years. Thank Me as well as your parents; towards Me lies the goal" (The Qur'ān 31:14).

It is reported that a man came to the Prophet and asked:

> "Messenger of God, who is the most deserving of good care from me?" The Prophet replied: "Your mother (which he repeated three times) then your father, then your nearest relatives in order".

In another *ḥadīth* the Prophet has said: "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers"—in other words Paradise awaits those who cherish and respect their mothers.

The Muslim mother has consequently a great feeling of security about the type of care and consideration she can expect from her children when she reaches old age. As the verse of the Qur'ān quoted above indicates, thankfulness to parents is linked with thankfulness to God, and a failure in

either of these respects is indeed a major failure in one's religious duties.

The principles of Islam made explicit in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* are belief and good conduct, and good conduct begins at home with one's closest relatives. A Westerner who has had close contact with a Muslim society cannot fail to be struck by the love and respect given to parents and the honour shown to old people in general, both men and women, as a direct application of these principles of Islam.

Sex and Society

We have discussed a Muslim woman's status with regard to her husband and her children. What then of her relations with men other than her husband and her close relatives? This is where a considerable difference is found between Islamic practice and the customs now prevalent in the Western world. In the West, sexual relations outside marriage are still in theory generally considered a sin or at least vaguely undesirable, but in practice no steps whatsoever are taken to reduce the very high incidence of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations, in spite of the soaring rates of illegitimacy and venereal disease. On the contrary, in films, television and certain sections of the press there is every encouragement to consider pre-marital experience desirable and extra-marital affairs quite normal. Contraception or abortion is expected to conveniently get rid of any undesirable side-affects of this way of life.

In contrast with this uncontrolled situation, Islam advocates a number of specific measures to reduce the temptations towards sex outside marriage.

To begin with, the Prophet advised all people to get married if they could so that their natural desires should have a legitimate and legal fulfilment.

Secondly, due to the permission for limited polygamy there is no necessity for there to be a surplus of unattached women in the society.

Thirdly women are directed in the Qur'ān when they appear in public to cover themselves in a modest type of dress so as not to attract men.

Fourthly the Muslim way of life excludes the boy-friend/girl-friend system, mixed parties, dancing between men and women, taking alcohol or drugs, and other facets of the Western way of life which are well known to provide the situation from which pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations develop. Social entertainments in Islam are generally either within the family and close friends of the family, or among men and women in separate groups.

Fifthly sex outside marriage is considered in Islamic law not only as a sin but as a crime which is punished under the law in the same way as theft or murder. The punishment for it applies equally to the man and woman and is severe and deterrent in its effect.

Let me now look back at some of these points in more detail since they are very relevant to the life style of a Muslim woman.

Dress

Firstly the matter of dress. A Muslim woman may wear whatever she pleases in the presence of her husband and family or among women friends. But when she goes out or when men other than her husband or close family are present she is expected to wear a dress which will cover all parts of her body, and which should not reveal the figure. What a contrast with Western fashions which every year concentrate quite intentionally on exposing yet another erogenous zone to the public gaze! In the past few years we have seen the rise and fall of the mini-dress, the micro-skirt, the wet look, hot pants, the see-thru', the topless and other garments designed to display or emphasize the intimate parts of a woman's body. One may observe a similar tendency of late in men's dress which has become almost skin-tight, although here the men's fashion designers appear to have come to a temporary standstill until men are liberated enough to accept topless or see-thru' trousers, which is fortunately not yet the case.

The intention of Western dress is to reveal the figure, while the intention of Muslim dress is to conceal it, at least in public. The relevant verse of the Qur'ān says:

> "O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the women of the believers to draw upon them their over-garments.

> That is more appropriate so that they may be recognised and not molested" (33:59).

It is therefore required for a Muslim woman when she goes out to wear a dress that covers her from head to foot and does not reveal the figure. According to some scholars only the hands and face should be left uncovered, while according to some others the face should also be covered. There are therefore two opinions on this matter.

The onus of modest behaviour however falls not only on women. The injunctions of the Qur'ān are directed to men and women alike. God says:

> "Tell believers to avert their glances and to guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is Informed about anything they do. Tell believing women to avert their glances and guard their private parts and not to display their charms except what (normally) appears of them. They should draw their coverings over their bosoms and not show their charms except to their husbands . . . ." (24:30-31).

Role Differentiation

One of the other practices aimed at strengthening the home and minimising promiscuity is that of the seclusion of women. The verses of the Qur'ān on which those who practise it base their custom say:

> "O wives of the Prophet you are not like any other women. If you would keep your duty, be not soft in speech, lest he whose heart contains malice may thereby be encouraged. Employ suitable speech. Stay in your houses and do not dress to display your finery in the way they dressed during the time of primitive ignorance; and keep up prayer, and give welfare due and obey God and His Messenger; for God desires only to remove from you abomination (of vanity since you are) the household (of the Prophet) and to purify you by a perfect purification" (The Qur'ān 33:32-33).

Literally these verses are addressed only to the wives of the Prophet, and some authorities maintain that it applies only to them. Other theologians and legists however interpret it by

implication to apply to all Muslim women, and this opinion is widely accepted in a number of Muslim countries where women generally stay at home, coming out only for some over-riding reason.

Some of the people who agree with this may nevertheless take into account the other verses of the Qur'ān exhorting women to cover themselves when they go out, and urging both men and women to lower their gaze and behave modestly in the presence of the opposite sex—implying that women could go out on their legitimate business. They may also consider the necessity of some Muslim women going out to study and practice certain occupations, such as medicine, nursing and teaching at all levels, which for Muslim women and girls ought to be done by fellow women.

One may therefore note that the two opinions exist, and that in practice one may see various degrees of seclusion or otherwise in different parts of the Muslim world.

In most parts of the world social functions among Muslims are either family affairs or celebrations by men and women in separate groups. To a Westerner accustomed to mixed parties with dancing and drinking this may sound an unexciting social life. However, the family circle in the Muslim world is generally a wide one, and the feeling of brotherhood is so strong and the hospitality of Muslims so warm and welcoming that alcohol and the presence of the opposite sex are found to be unnecessary ingredients of the enjoyment.

Polygamy

Perhaps the aspect of Islam in respect of women which is most prominent in the Western mind is that of polygamy. Firstly let me clarify that Islam does not impose polygamy as a universal practice. The Prophet himself was a monogamist for the greater part of his married life, from the age of twenty-five when he married Khadīja until he was fifty when she died.

One should therefore regard monogamy as the norm and polygamy as the exception.

One may observe that, although it has been abused in some times and some places, polygamy has under certain circum-

stances a valuable function. In some situations it may be considered as the lesser of two evils, and in other situations it may even be a positively beneficial arrangement.

The most obvious example of this occurs in times of war when there are inevitably large numbers of widows and girls whose fiances and husbands have been killed in the fighting. One has only to recall the figures of the dead in the first and second world wars to be aware that literally millions of women and girls lost their husbands and fiances and were left alone without any income or care or protection for themselves or their children. If it is still maintained that under these circumstances a man may marry only one wife, what options are left to the millions of other women who have no hope of getting a husband? Their choice, bluntly stated, is between a chaste and childless old maidenhood, or becoming somebody's mistress, that is an unofficial second wife with no legal rights for herself or for her children. Most women would not welcome either of these since most women have always wanted and still do want the security of a legal husband and family.

The compromise therefore is for women under these circumstances to face the fact that if given the alternative many of them would rather share a husband than have none at all. And there is no doubt that it is easier to share a husband when it is an established and publicly recognised practice than when it is carried on secretly along with attempts to deceive the first wife.

And it is no secret that polygamy of a sort is widely carried on in Europe and America. The difference is that while the Western man has no legal obligations to his second, third or fourth mistresses and their children, the Muslim husband has complete legal obligations towards his second, third or fourth wife and their children.

There may be other circumstances unrelated to war—individual circumstances, where marriage to more than one wife may be preferable to other available alternatives—for example where the first wife is chronically sick or disabled. There are of course some husbands who can manage this situation, but no one would deny its potential hazards. A second marriage in some cases could be a solution acceptable to all three parties.

Again there are cases in which a wife is unable to have children, while the husband very much wants them. Under Western laws a man must either accept his wife's childlessness if he can, or if he cannot he must find a means of divorce in order to marry again. This could be avoided in some cases if the parties agreed on a second marriage.

There are other cases where a marriage has not been very successful and the husband loves another woman. This situation is so familiar that it is known as the Eternal Triangle. Under Western laws the husband cannot marry the second woman without divorcing the first one. But the first wife may not wish to be divorced. She may no longer love her husband, but she may still respect him and wish to stay with him for the security of marriage, for herself and their children. Similarly the second woman may not wish to break up the man's first family. There are certain cases such as this where both women could accept a polygamous marriage rather than face divorce on the one hand or an extra-marital affair on the other.

I have mentioned some of these examples because to the majority of Westerners polygamy is only thought of in the context of a harem of glamorous young girls, not as a possible solution to some of the problems of Western society itself. I have given some time to it not in order to advocate its indiscriminate use, but in an attempt to show that it is a practice not to be condemned without thinking of its uses and possible benefits in any community.

Summing Up

To summarise what has gone before, I would say that the role of women in Islam has been misunderstood in the West because of general ignorance of the Islamic system and way of life as a whole, and because of the distortions of the media.

The Muslim woman is accorded full spiritual and intellectual equality with man, and is encouraged to practice her religion and develop her intellectual faculties throughout her life. In her relations with men both are to observe modesty of behaviour and dress and a strict code of morality which discourages unnecessary mixing of the sexes. Her relations with her husband should be based on mutual love and compassion. He is respon-

sible for the maintenance of the wife and children, and she is to give him the respect due to the head of the family. She is responsible for the care of the home and the children's early training. She may own her own property, run her own business and inherit in her own right.

She may not be married without being consulted and is able to obtain divorce. The system of limited polygamy can be seen to have its uses which may be in the interests of women as well as men. Finally she can look forward to an old age in which she is respected and shown every care by her children and by the society as a whole.

It would appear therefore that the Islamic system has achieved the right mixture of freedom and security that women seek and that is in the interests of the society as a whole. As I mentioned at the start of this paper, I have given the relevant quotations directly from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* since these are obviously the most authentic sources. If at different times and in different places these principles and laws have sometimes been distorted, ignored or flouted, it is not the principles and laws which are at fault, but man's selfishness which sometimes leads them to distort, ignore and flout what they do not like, and turn aside from the truth.

Fortunately no one has changed or can change the words of the Qur'ān, and the regulations for the protection of women which were revealed in the 7th century can be easily verified by anyone in the 20th century, as we have just been doing. I believe that these laws and social regulations regarding women contain certain fundamental truths which will benefit whoever applies them. The present time of widespread rethinking of the role and rights of women is perhaps the appropriate time to look with fresh eyes at the Islamic point of view, which has contributed to the formation of stable societies in both sophisticated and underdeveloped peoples in vast areas of the world over the past fourteen centuries, which has retained the continuity of its principles, and from which the Western world may have something to learn.

FAMILY LIFE IN ISLAM

Fatima Heeren

2

Family Life in Islam

In a time when values tend to be turned upside down, family life as the very heart of society was attacked just as much as many other handed-down traditions. About ten years ago, when it became fashionable for young torch-bearers of "Modernism" to live in "communities", share sex and children and earnings, many people feared that this might mean the end of family life. Fortunately, this is not so. In the end, the overwhelming majority of young women still dream of having a wedding ring on their finger, living in a comfortable flat as "Mrs. So-and-so" and bringing up their children in an orderly home, just as young men prefer to introduce "her" with the words "This is my wife" instead of "this is my mate or comrade". Neither Socialism nor any other "isms" were able to uproot what has been implanted into human nature from time immemorial.

If dangers for family and particularly matrimonial life could be overcome successfully in the West, they were the more unable to gain ground in the Muslim World. There, family life with all its aspects concerning not only husband, wife and children, but all other relatives too, is so firmly established by tradition as well as by religious law that it could not be affected seriously.

The Islamic Approach

Now, one may say that a happy and healthy family life cannot be guaranteed by law. It is true that it depends so much upon the goodwill of all concerned that the best laws remain written phrases where this goodwill is missing. Here, however, as in all other spheres of the Islamic Way of Life, the ruling factor is the fact that Islam is not a religion in the Western sense of the

word, but truly THE WAY OF LIFE for those adhering to it. Islam means on the one hand the complete submission to the Will of God. And on the other, it is the conscious acceptance of man's vicegerency on earth as ordained by God.

Submission to the Will of God, if applied to family life, means accepting the desires inherent in man's nature and living up to them: the desire for a companion with whom one can share love, mutual confidence, kindness, self-sacrifice and solace; the desire for children, the desire for parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and all other relatives whom one can trust and who may either grant protection or be granted protection; the desire for a peaceful and fostering home; the desire for a good education; the desire for help in the hour of need; and the desire for doing good or receiving good, just as the events may demand.

The conscious acceptance of man's vicegerency on earth means seeking the best possible means for a successful vicegerency. And here again family life provides the most promising basis for our activities. A good and healthy family life grants us the right approach to life, helps us to see matters in the right perspective, gives us the most useful education not only as far as our future profession is concerned but also for the handling of life itself. When we are grown up, it gives us a safe home that enables us to take part in society life to its greatest benefit, and when we become old, it grants us our livelihood just as we used to grant it when we were still able to do so.

To people completely engrossed in the way of life prevailing in the West today, this may sound incredible. Why not leave children in the nursery and depend on their education at school —after all, what a lot of taxes are paid for this purpose? And why feel responsible for relatives in need or old family members since they certainly must be insured against troubles of all sorts and there are homes for old people where they are neither disturbed not can disturb... ? There are so many and much more useful and lucrative things to do instead of looking after children and caring for old or sick family members.

Yet, incredible though it may sound—in the Muslim World these responsibilities are still shouldered by the majority of

families. This is due to the Islamic injunctions which have not at all become obsolete in the course of modern techno-industrial developments but are taken quite seriously by Muslims up to this very day. And why is this so? I think it is so because Muslims honestly believe in their accountability for their conduct here on earth on the Day of Resurrection, because they are fully aware of their role as God's vicegerents and because they feel contentment in fulfilling their religious duties, thus achieving God's good pleasure which is the main aim of their very existence.

Non-Muslims may wonder how a religion can still exercise such a powerful influence over people in modern times that at least in this sphere Western examples are rather shunned instead of being imitated contrary to the usual trend in most other fields.

Structure of Muslim Family

It is the firm structure of Islamic family life resting on the following four pillars that makes these values so enduring and enables them to outlive Western practices. They are based on Qur'ānic regulations and the traditions from the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), handed down from generation to generation.

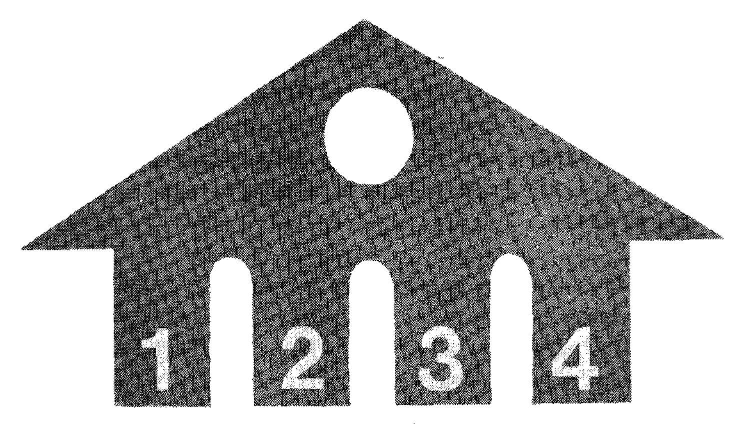
1. Family life as a cradle of human society providing a secure, healthy and encouraging home for parents and the growing children;

2. Family life as guardian of the natural erotic desires of men and women, leading this powerful urge into wholesome channels;

3. Family life as the very breeding-place for human virtues like love, kindness, mercy.

4. Family life as the most secure refuge against inward and outward troubles.

FIRM AND SHELTERING STRUCTURE OF ISLAMIC FAMILY LIFE



1st Pillar: Home and Encouragement

2nd Pillar: Eros and Children

3rd Pillar: Sympathetic Virtues

4th Pillar: Refuge

An ever valid and never outgrowing aspect of Islamic family life is, however, that the strength of all the four pillars is made up by the system. And it must not be forgotten, that the benefits of family life are extended not only to blood relations but encompass also the world-wide family of Muslims, the Islamic brotherhood.

Let us look more closely now at each of these four pillars.

I—THE FAMILY AS A CRADLE FOR HUMAN SOCIETY

If the family is to be a wholesome cradle for human society, it means that the children as continuators of the human race must find there warmth, patience and every possible advancement in their all-round education. For this purpose, they must have a mother who considers the care for her children not as a part-time job but as one of her foremost duties. And they must have a father who "according to the patriarchical nature of Islam, is an *Imām* for the family on whose shoulders rests the religious responsibility of the family. He must," as Syed Abul

A'la Mawdudi puts it so beautifully, "uphold the tenets of faith and his authority symbolizes that of God in the world. The man is in fact respected in the family precisely because of the sacred total function he fulfills. The rebellion of Muslim women in certain quarters of Islamic society came when men themselves ceased to fulfill their religious function and lost their virile and patriarchical character". This is the noteworthy opinion of a world-wide renowned Islamic scholar.

With a home where mother and father are aware of their important role and realize that the world of tomorrow will be what they make of their children, the foundation of society will remain intact.

As to the education of the children, I think it should consist of the following four phases: the basis covering the period from birth up to the twentieth year, that is the time when the child leaves home, must be the Islamic Milieu created in the family. As modern psychology teaches us, this milieu exercises its most important influence on the child already during the first years of life. It is many small and great things that make up this Islamic Milieu. Foremost condition is that the parents love and respect each other, that they are—according to Islamic patterns—patient and extend cherishing care to the children. But it is also important that the children can listen to beautiful recitations from the Qur'ān—there are excellent records nowadays—that they realize when there is Ramaḍān, the month of fasting, when the great festive days are celebrated, and also that Muslim friends and relatives come on visits or are visited. And they must hear words like Allah and Muḥammad uttered in a loving voice. This is what in fact many of us are doing anyway. But for an Islamic Milieu it is also significant that the home where Muslims live is furnished with some Islamic items at least. I don't mean the usual cheap sentimentalities but true, undiluted culture. The children should see some really beautiful calligraphies on the walls, perhaps a good carpet here and there and other things which cannot be found in a Western household. And Muslims should at least at home wear traditional dress as used in their homelands and take their shoes off, even if only upon entering the living room. Thus they will keep a close contact to their own heritage and the children will distinctly feel that they are Muslims which will fill them with confidence and natural pride for their community.

The Education Process

The second phase I would call the phase of telling. We know from our scientists how the consciousness of children is formed by listening at an early age to horror stories and thrillers and how it may, on the other hand, be given wings by enchanting tales. Here lies ahead a wide field for parents endowed with fantasy and much goodwill. They will study again the stories of the former prophets as told in the Qur'ān, read the many beautiful traditions of the last Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and the heroes of Islamic history. By gathering all their love, intelligence and good humour, they can make up the most interesting and inspiring tales of all this and according to my experience it is particularly the period from the second to the fifth year when children are most eager to listen to such stories. The mother may tell them to the child while going about her duties in the home and in most cases very nice discussions will follow since the child has his questions and wants to mention his own views. In this way the child's character can definitely be formed and standards may be established which maintain their validity throughout his lifetime.

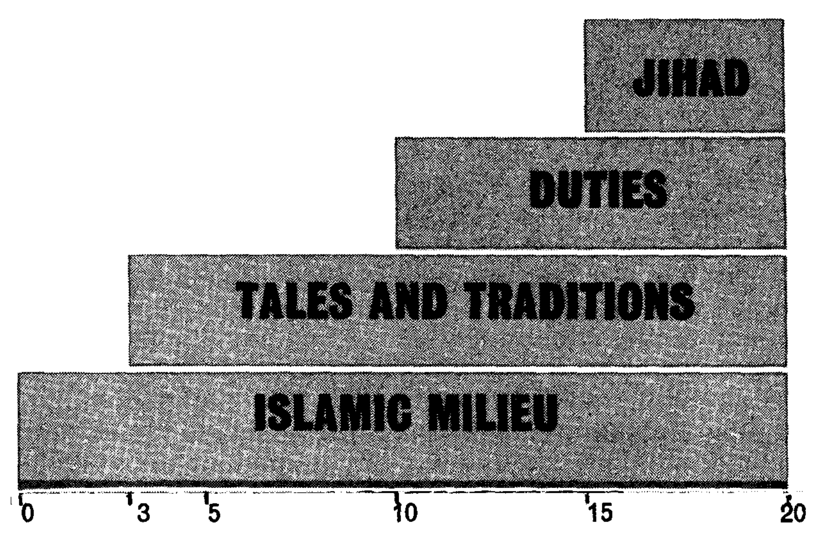
Islamic Duties

The third phase established on the first and second, is that of the Islamic duties. It is only natural that a child wants to imitate his praying parents. He is given a small prayer rug and though at first he will be patient for a few minutes at most, in due course he will learn how to pray and get used to a daily rhythm and routine as envisaged by Islam. It will be similar with keeping fast. At first, the child will not stand this for more than a few hours. But slowly he will manage half a day, and even a whole day. Here, it is very important that *Saḥūr* and *Ifṭār*, the meals before beginning fast and after breaking fast, are really celebrated a bit. How proud the child will be if he is allowed to rise early in the morning for the first time in order to have breakfast with his parents, what a satisfaction it will be for him if he really managed to keep fast for a whole day. I think many parents will have the experience that the child himself will plead to be allowed to keep fast again instead of having to be persuaded to join the grown-ups. Also, there will always be opportunities for giving alms. The child should get the nice bright coin so that he himself can spend it, thus learning that some money should go to the needy or into the collection box

of a mosque instead of being used for buying toys or sweets. With regard to the pilgrimage, the child should be told how Muslims from all over the world gather at the Holy Places for the important purpose of being closely knit together into one brotherhood worshipping their Creator as the servants of the Almighty have done in an uninterrupted chain since the time of Abraham.

The child will now be a conscious Muslim and therefore a broad basis has been established on which the fourth phase can rest firmly.

THE FOUR PHASES OF BASIC ISLAMIC EDUCATION AT HOME AND IN THE FAMILY



Training for Life

This is the phase of *Jihād*. The child, about 15 years old, has learned that life on this earth means trial and that only those can successfully emerge from this trial who submit to the Will of God in profound reverence and humility. It is, however, inherent in the nature of man and particularly in that of young and energetic people that they are looking for a real aim in life, something for which they can strive. There is, of course, a variety of elementary aims in everyday life like not neglecting the religious duties, passing school exams, getting over an illness, taking

up a useful job, finding a loving husband or wife and bringing up good children. All these are, however, individual achievements necessary for a stable basis. Healthy ambition will, nevertheless, be directed towards some higher aim. If it is not guided into the right channels, it will easily fall prey to demagogic persuasion and aspire for dangerous idols like all the prevailing "isms", from Nationalism to Communism.

• *Jihād*, the struggle for the cause of Islam, offers so many opportunities that every Muslim will find the field of action suited to his mentality and talents. This struggle may be conducted—in the hour of need—with the sword as well as with the pen, with the shovel as with the scalpel, or even with a sewing machine or a pot-ladle. *Jihād* is a struggle against all forces attacking Islam from within and without. Whether these attacks are being waged in order to ridicule Islam, to weaken its traditions and customs or to undermine its political power—they have to be taken most seriously because they are out to destroy the very roots of our heritage.

A family, where this spirit is constantly kept alert, will be the best guarantee for a sound Islamic society because it enables all family members to assume their vicegerency consciously. And this is one of the most important purposes of family life.

It was necessary to devote special care to the explanation of this first and foremost pillar of family life containing the aspect of education since it is concerned with the future of human society at large.

II—THE FAMILY AS GUARDIAN OF DESIRES

We now come to the second pillar, that of family life as guardian of the natural erotic desires of man. It is on purpose that I would give Eros preference over Sex since this word has been misused so badly that it tends to distort rather than to describe what I want to say.

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) has said: "Marriage is a part of my *sunnah,* whoever runs away from my path is not from amongst us". In the Qur'ān, Sūra II, Verse 187 men are told: "They (your wives) are your garments and you are their garments....So now associate with them". Islam being the complete way of life that always takes into considera-

tion the natural disposition of man, enjoins marriage. And it tells us in a few beautiful words how husband and wife should, like garments, cover and protect each other, how they may find fulfilment in each other in their erotic urges, in their desire for children and in mutual exchange of love and tenderness. I would like to add a few personal words here since as a convert to Islam I am sometimes asked how I feel about the approach of Islam towards matrimony.

Arranged Marriages

What I appreciated by watching how well it is usually working out, is firstly the custom in Muslim families of so-called arranged marriages. During my stay in a Muslim country, as well as from the numerous former students and other Muslim friends whom I have known over 15 years, I could always observe that family life in arranged marriages is far more lasting and stable than in the average Western family. It seems that where parents or relatives with much insight and experience propose marriages, they do it on a broad basis considering family background, education, ambitions, likes and dislikes and so many other things. And though nearly all Muslim marriages are conducted by buying the cat in the bag (as we say in Germany) which means it is not discovered beforehand whether the partners fit together sexually, as is customary in the West, they can be called far more successful than marriages here.

Polygamy

Secondly it is the ticklish matter of polygamy. Before the Registrar married me to my European Muslim husband, he warned me of the four wives which would be admissable to him if we should ever live in a Muslim country. Though a bit awe-struck at first, I soon learned that just because having more than one wife is allowed in Islam, it is practised very seldom. And since this official concession to the polygamous disposition undoubtedly inherent in some men, or to extraordinary circumstances like constant illness or barrenness of the first wife on the other hand, completely prohibits sexual relations outside marriage, I hold it to be a very wise decision. If a Muslim man for this or that reason simply cannot help desiring more than one wife, he is not forced by this urge to resort to any sinful act but may quite lawfully enjoy its fulfilment along with shouldering the consequent responsibilities. That, in my eyes, is the main point: hardly any man will merely for the sake of his

greediness support more than one wife and the children out of this liaison, justly dividing his attention between his wives and offspring. He will think more than twice before he acts, while in societies without such sensible rules it is so terribly easy to jump into bed and walk away afterwards. Instead of the essential human dignity for the other woman, nothing but misery and degradation is in store for her and perhaps even her child. There are so many sad examples before us that no further comments are required on this subject.

Divorce

Thirdly, in matters of divorce I hold the Islamic solution to be much superior to any others I know. If for any reason, seldom though this does happen in practice, husband and wife consider it impossible to live together any longer, there is no loathsome chain keeping them together by force. They may separate in peace and each of them may seek fulfilment with somebody else. If a wife cannot stand her husband taking another wife, she can always ask for a divorce and is not forced to tolerate what seems intolerable to her. Is it not more in tune with human dignity if in these matters no mystery-mongering is required? The husband does not have to tell fantastic lies whenever he wants to meet his girlfriend, the wife needn't pretend not to notice what is going on behind her back? Or if a husband thinks he cannot put up any longer with some bad habits or other things in his wife, there is no need for him to torture her by illtreatment—he simply separates from her. And the same applies to the wife. In this way, human society will be much more clean and healthy, homes will not be miserable for children and none of the spouses is condemned to lifelong unhappiness. There are a number of laws and regulations concerning divorce which I consider as most sensible, be it in respect to the financial position of a divorced woman and her children or in other respects, but it would lead us too far off to discuss them here. As Abū Dāwūd relates, the Prophet has said: "Of all things permitted by law, divorce is the most hateful in the sight of God". And I think, this very strong tradition is also responsible for the fact that divorce, necessary though it may be in certain cases, is practised so extremely seldom in Muslim families.

Woman's Status

And fourthly, I want to say a few words about the status of women in Islam. In the Qur'ān we read:

> "Women have the same (rights in relation to their husbands) as are expected in all decency from them; while men stand a step above them" (2:228).

Those who want to find fault with Islamic regulations, consider this detrimental to the dignity of women. But I am of the opinion that this one sentence includes all that is necessary for my happiness as a woman. It grants me all rights for which I aspire—the right for education, for my own property, for being the guardian inside the house and even for a job if circumstances demand it, to name only a few aspects. But, most important of all, it grants me the right to depend on my husband, be it in matters of my livelihood or in regard to any important decisions that have to be taken for the benefit of the family. On the husband, however, rests the great responsibility of caring for his family and finding by consulting his wife and making use of all his wisdom, the best possible solutions. Does it not lie in the very nature of a woman that she wants a powerful, just, wise and considerate husband who is capable of taking these decisions? This, I think, is the ideal family life as envisaged by Islam. In such an atmosphere, both partners will find fulfilment in erotic matters as well as in all other matrimonial fields of which rearing children has pre-eminence.

III—THE FAMILY AND CHARACTER-BUILDING

In regard to the third pillar, that of human virtues like love, kindness and mercy, I would like to let the Qur'ān speak for me:

> "We have instructed man to be kind to both his parents. His mother bears him with nausea and gives birth to him painfully. Bearing him and weaning him last thirty months, until when he attains his maturity and reaches forty years (of age), he says:
>
> > "My Lord, make me grateful for Your favour which You have shown to me and to both my parents, and let me act honourably so that You may approve of it. Be good to me with respect to my offspring; I have turned toward You and am one of those who are Muslims" (46:15).

We are further told in the Qur'ān:

> "Your Lord has decreed that you should worship nothing except Him, and (show) kindness to your parents; whether one or both of them attain old age (while they are) still with

> you, never say to them: 'Shame!' nor scold either of them. Speak to them in generous fashion. Protect them carefully and SAY: "My Lord, show them mercy, just as they cared for me as a little child" (17:23-24).

What a spirit of mutual kindness, this lowering of the wing of mercy on us while we are helpless. And later on, our protecting tenderness to our children and our elders when they are in need of it! If we are good and patient, understanding and encouraging in our behaviour towards our family members, thus bringing forth the very same virtues in them as well, we are sure to carry these virtues forward into human society as well. A tender and considerate family father will also be good to those whom he meets outside the home, just as he will be strict and uncompromising when he has to protect his family or his fellow men against vices that are out to undermine or destroy these virtues.

IV—THE FAMILY AS REFUGE

And to round off the argument the fourth pillar grants us within the fold of family life a secure refuge against inward and outward troubles. In a time when people mistrust each other, when everybody thinks of himself first and it is considered a crime to be bothered with the worries of others, only those are well off who know that there is for them at least one place of refuge. Here we may get either good advice or a piece of bread, a helping hand or a bed. Here we can be sure to be defended against the outside world, and we know that the other family members are expecting of us the best and not the worst which helps us so much to unfold our best qualities. Thus, the family is a marvellous institution for the needy as well as for those who are able to help. No other social institution has so far shouldered similar responsibilities as successfully as the family.

The more perfect a society has become in the eyes of a superficial spectator, the more heart-rending may all its utterly impersonal social achievements appear in the sight of those who know the cherishing care and warmth of a truly Islamic family life.

3

Discussion

The two lectures were followed by discussion which, however, was concentrated on issues arising out of the first lecture. A slightly edited version of the discussion is given below.

Polyandry

Question: I would like to ask a question in relation to polygamy. If one concedes the arguments you have given in support of a man having more than one wife in certain circumstances, would the same arguments be extended to the situation of a woman in relation to her husband/husbands? To be more precise, if a woman becomes invalid and sexually incapacitated and because of that the husband is allowed to have a second wife, why the same should not hold good in respect of men. If a husband becomes invalid, would it be permitted for the wife to have a second husband?

B. Aisha Lemu: The instances which I quoted were examples of human circumstances where there is a genuine problem and I mentioned that in the Western world the options are limited. That is, either you stay with it or you obtain divorce, you cannot bring the third alternative of another wife. Now the question of a woman having more than one husband raises a number of other problems. One of them is the question of inheritance. If a woman has more than one husband, there is no certainty of the paternity of the child, and I think this is something which will be very disturbing to men, not to be sure that a certain child is their own, that it might be the child of another husband. Another problem that one could foresee here is that for a woman to look after one husband is, generally speaking, considered to

be quite enough trouble (laughter and applause) without bringing upon herself more than one. So there is no provision, as far as I am aware, under Islamic law for this to take place, but since this is a discussion, there may be some scholars here who can give more information than I have.

Khurshid Ahmad: May I add a word or two to what Sister Aisha has said. First let us understand the Islamic position. Islam allows polygamy in certain cases but it does not allow polyandry, that is a woman having more than one husband, in any case. This is the legal position. The question arises why is this so. Sister Aisha has made two points. Along with her subjective retort that one husband is more than enough, she has pointed to the complexities this would raise for establishing the paternity of the children, and secondly about the problems of inheritance. I would like to invite you to a few other aspects.

First, sociologically speaking, the institution of a family in a patriarchal set-up can operate effectively in case of polygamy but it would simply disintegrate under polyandry. For arguments' sake, it is possible to have polyandrous families in a matriarchal set-up, but this would mean a change in the entire social matrix.

Secondly, from a sexo-sociological viewpoint, it is possible for a man to have sexual relations with all his wives, if he has more than one, and impregnate them. But if a wife has more than one husband, she can, even in that case, be impregnated only by one.

This should also be kept in view that once a woman is pregnant she is not available for sexual relations for some of the time. In fact, one of the arguments advanced by some sexologists in favour of polygamy (See: Ludovici, Anthony M., *Woman: A Vindication*, Constable, London; and MacFarlane, J. E. Clare, *The Case for Polygamy*) is that as sexual relations are not possible with the wife during these periods, forced monogamy is unnatural. If the possibilities of a properly married second wife are denied, the dangers of illicit sex become very real. If this is the situation in a one-husband-one-wife equation, what would be the predicament in a many-husband-one-wife polygon?

Thirdly, even from the physio-sexological viewpoint this arrangement would be an anomaly. Of the many aspects let us just refer to one. If we examine the *origin* and not merely communication of venereal diseases, we find that they originate from a woman being sexually visited by more than one man. As long as there is a one-man one-woman relationship, venereal diseases would not originate. If a man has sexual contact with more than one woman but the woman with whom he is having this relationship is not in sexual relationship with any other man, venereal diseases would not originate. But if a woman has sexual relations with more than one man the possibilities of the origination of venereal diseases present themselves.[1] It is the nature of things and a violation of this would disturb the entire scheme of life. Polygamy has a place in this scheme, polyandry has none.

Islam has forbidden polyandry not for any partiality towards man, but for the good of man and woman both and of the entire human society.

Inheritance

Question: I wonder if your can hear me. This is a very personal problem. I have two daughters. Now when I die,

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1. To illustrate this let us form a few sets of relations: a, b, c......h represent men and s, t, u......z represent women.

Set I

a	married	to	s	
b	,,	,,	t	
c	,,	,,	u	V.D.
d	,,	,,	v	cannot
e	,,	,,	w	originate
f	,,	,,	x	
g	,,	,,	y	
h	,,	,,	z	

Set II

a	married	to	s	
a	,,	,,	t	
b	,,	,,	u	V.D.
b	,,	,,	v	cannot
b	,,	,,	w	originate
c	,,	,,	x	
c	,,	,,	y	
c	,,	,,	z	

Set III

a	married	to	s	
b	,,	,,	s	
c	,,	,,	t	
d	,,	,,	t	V.D. can originate
e	,,	,,	t	
f	,,	,,	u	
g	,,	,,	u	
h	,,	,,	u	

because I have failed to produce a male issue, which is no fault of mine, my property after my death will be shared by my husband, by my two children and by my brothers and sisters in the absence of my parents. Now, if I would have produced one male child, or if one of my two daughters had been a boy, my property would not have been shared by my brothers and sisters. I think this is a punishment to my children. Why this punishment?

Aisha Lemu replies: I feel this is a case where as I mentioned in the lecture, we have to realise that Islam is to be taken as a whole. We shouldn't take part of a certain law in isolation from the other parts of the law. As we mentioned, in Islam it is the responsibility of men to take care of the women in the society, so whether it is a wife or a daughter or a mother or any female relative to whom you are more nearly related, who has no other relative to turn to, male members of the family have the responsibility of looking after such girls or women. And the senior a male member is, the greater is his responsibility. So this is why we feel that the larger portion of the inheritance should go to the male, since they have the responsibility for looking after the female. If this were taken in isolation and the women had equal responsibility for looking after themselves and depended on nobody but themselves, one would say yes, this is unjust. But in the context of the Islamic legal system, where she is the responsibility of the menfolk, it strikes me that this is not an injustice. Perhaps some legal experts may like to add on what I have said.

Khurshid Ahmad: May I once again interject at this stage? The question relates to a very specific area of Islam, that is, its law of inheritance. The Islamic law of inheritance is in itself a very well balanced and inter-related whole, and one has to take it as a whole. Now taking the specific instance you have quoted, you are very correct that as far as the law goes, that in the case under discussion a part of the inheritance, that is belongings left on death would be shared by your brothers and sisters as well. Law always takes into view the general situation, not the remote exceptions. But the Islamic system does take care of even such exceptional situations. Girls in a situation you describe would not be thrown to the dogs. They would be protected in the family, and the family does not mean

just father and mother. The family represents a much extended relationship. Your brothers, your sisters, your parents, all of them are part of that family, and in the absence of any one of the members, they will be looking after the affairs of your children. Now, you must not forget the Islamic principle of guardianship. For example, in the case you refer to, in your absence, there would be some other person who would act as the guardian for these girls from within the family, and that would be from these very near relations. That is why in inheritance shares go to all those near relatives who have to play a role in this framework of relationships, so that the whole of the family remains an integral unit and everyone remains conscious of his/her responsibilities. It is hoped that the share which your brothers or sisters, or, if your own parents are alive, they get is not merely used for their own benefit, but for the good of the entire unit, that is the family. The Islamic law emphasizes that these elders would be taking care of your children financially, morally, socially and otherwise. These children are the flesh of their flesh and the bones of their bones. They are morally and legally enjoined to support them. And that is why the system recognizes their share in the inheritance. And above all, Islam is not merely a set of laws—it is a moral code, a social arrangement and a system of support and guardianship. The family plays this role, whatever be the situation.

Covering the Face

Question: According to the Qur'ān, men and women have to lower their gaze when they have to go out in public. If the woman has to cover herself from top to toe, there would be no point in the man lowering his gaze. This would imply that women would keep their faces uncovered, hence the men have to lower their gaze and not chase them with their eyes. If the Qur'ān is telling both men and women to lower their gaze in each others presence, the implication is that the woman is not veiled on her face, otherwise what is there to lower your eyes from? May I further suggest that during the *Hajj* (pilgrimage) it is specifically forbidden for a woman to cover her face with a veil.

Aisha Lemu: I appreciate very much the point of [illegible] and I think you can see with your eyes where [illegible] lies in the matter. I accept both these points, and [illegible]

merely mentioned that there is another opinion which exists which is held by some people, and they consider they have a basis for it. If they wish to express it, then let them do so.

Khurshid Ahmad: Just to set the record straight, let me briefly state the other viewpoint. The assumption that if the Qur'ān asks men and women to bring down their gaze and not to stare at each other, it implies that the face must be kept open, is imaginative, but does not carry us very far. If the Qur'ān says that you do not approach the *Ṣalāt* (prayer) if you are intoxicated, that does not mean that intoxication is permitted when you are not praying. There are a number of ways in which you can see one another, even see temptingly, even if the body is covered. Bringing down the gaze represents an attitude and not merely an act. As such, it is not specifically related to seeing the other's face, but his or her whole being. Moreover the argument about covering the face is based upon certain inferences from the Qur'ān, developed further in the *ḥadīth*. It is a principle of Islam that the teachings of the Qur'ān are to be understood in the light of the sayings of the Prophet. Both taken together do affirm that the women should, when they go out, cover their bodies properly, and the body includes the face. Only those parts of the body like hands and feet that reveal themselves in walking are allowed to remain so. We must concede that on this issue there are two viewpoints and both are derived from careful reflection on the original sources. Everyone is free to prefer any one of these on the basis of arguments, but should also respect the other viewpoint. The reference to the *Ḥajj* is not relevant. Injunctions about the *Hajj* represent a special case and it would be ill advised to generalise from that. In *iḥrām* men cannot cover their heads or in *wuqūf Muzdalīfa, Maghrib* prayer is not offered at its appointed time but is joined with *Ishāc*, All these represent special cases and it would be hazardous to generalise them.

Dress

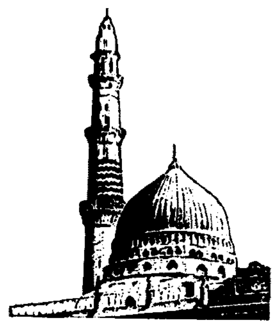
Observations by a woman from the audience: I would like to say a few words about dress. Mrs Lemu made only a very brief reference to it. Firstly, there is the question of priorities. Islam wants to change our outlook on life. The reference to men and then to women to cast down their eyes is intentional and not just accidental. The Qur'ān and *Sunnah* are not silent on

rules about dress. There are detailed instructions as to how men should cover themselves and also detailed instructions as to how women should cover themselves. Whether women should cover their faces or not is just one element of the whole scheme. In our present situation we have a very difficult problem as the whole scheme is not being properly followed. Some men have emancipated themselves from Islamic requirements of dress, and yet they expect that their womenfolk should cover themselves. There is no authority for men not to have beards. But some of them are not respectful of these injunctions. Islamic instructions are for both and I think both should honestly search their hearts as to how much they try to abide by them.

"During the last fifteen years since I came to accept Islam," says Aisha Lemu, "I have been asked many questions about the Muslim way of life by non-Muslim friends and acquaintances. The ignorance of the ordinary educated Westerner about Islam is almost total; but the area where the vacuum of knowledge has been most effectively filled with misinformation is possibly concerning the role of women in Islam."

Whatever be the state of the vacuum or the substance that fills it, one of the pressing needs of today is to provide authentic information about the religion of Islam. A clear and precise statement about the position of woman in Islam was made by two Muslim women coming from the Western background, one English and the other German, in their presentation before the International Islamic Conference held in April, 1976, in London, under the auspices of the Islamic Council of Europe. These papers are presented in this book.

Woman in Islam provides every serious student of Islam with an opportunity to develop an understanding of Islam from those who stand within the Islamic tradition and who have also close contact with the European tradition.



Islamic Council of Europe